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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the extent to which American university student interviewers perceived differences in certain nonverbal cues (conversational space and hand gestures) in interviews with persons from another culture and whether the American students perceived such observations affected their ability to listen to the interviewee. Subjects were 103 pairs of students with the interviewees representing 39 countries from the areas of Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. Results indicated: (1) variations in the perceptions of the American interviewers based in both the type of nonverbal cue (conversational space or hand gestures) and on the different area of the world of the interviewee; (2) that it may be either more difficult or easier to listen depending on the type of nonverbal cue or the cultural area of the world on the interviewee; and (3) where there is a negative impact on listening due to different interpretations of a nonverbal cue, it may occur because the interviewer perceives something is directed at him/her personally or at what he/she said. (Contains 12 references. A nonverbal communication questionnaire is attached.) (RS)

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STUDENT TO STUDENT INTERCULTURAL INTERVIEWS:
CONVERSATIONAL SPACE, GESTURES, AND LISTENING

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Abstract

A constant flow of information indicates that the probability of persons engaging in "communicating across cultures" continues to rise. While some persons lack adequate knowledge and skill to communicate effectively interculturallly, it is said what likely limits more people may be that they have had only a "passive" experience with other cultures.

This paper discusses the outcomes of an intercultural interview project which attempts to involve university students in an "active" experience with a person from another culture. American students interviewed international persons to exchange information about their respective cultures and how they communicate. Of equal importance was their goal to discuss "how the communication was going" between them in the process of the interviews. The particular focus was on certain nonverbal cues and how the cues affected their ability to listen.

The research questions were: 1) Does the American university student interviewer perceive differences in the use of conversational space and hand gestures by the person from the other culture? 2) If differences are perceived, specifically what was different? and 3) Do differences in the meanings for the nonverbal cues impact on his/her listening behavior as perceived by the interviewer?

Data was based on 103 pairs of students with the interviewees representing 39 countries from the areas of Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East.

Results reveal variations in the perceptions of the American interviewers based on both the type of nonverbal cue (conversational space or hand gestures) and on the different area of the world of the interviewee. In addition, findings indicate that it may be either more difficult or easier to listen depending on the type of nonverbal cue or the cultural area of the world of the interviewee. Finally, where there is a negative impact on listening due to different interpretations of a nonverbal cue, it may occur because the interviewer perceives something is directed at him/her personally or at what he/she said.

Introduction

We live in a multi-cultural world. An education that helps students acquire intercultural communication skills is a necessity for everyone, not just for the culturally "deprived" or distinct (Seelye, 1993, 267).

This statement points to a vital area of concern and raises the question: What is the level of competence of American university students about other cultures? Unfortunately, it appears many students are similar to other Americans in having a lack of understanding of other cultures. How should university educators attempt to improve the cultural understanding and, in particular, the intercultural communication effectiveness of students?

The literature reveals that it may not be a lack of understanding but may be that students have only a "passive" understanding. Sikkema and Niyekawa maintain that what is needed is the opportunity for students to engage in face-to-face interaction to increase the probability of gaining "active understanding".

Among approaches structured to address "active understanding" of another culture is an activity in which students participate in interviews with someone from another culture. Hall (1988, November) discusses such a project assigned in a college course in intercultural communication. The project is an effort to significantly cover both an analysis of the content of the interview and the communication behavior of the questioner. The thesis upon which this experience is based is that only through the satisfaction and even the frustration of face-to-face interaction with someone from another culture is there really experiential involvement and thus the increased chance for

"active understanding".

The project described in the preceding account takes a rather broad approach examining the over-all process of communication. Another perspective might be gained by focusing on a specific aspect of the communication process, for example, the process of listening. How significant is the role of listening in intercultural communication? Dodd (1991, 302) believes that among the numerous interpersonal skills we can access for effective intercultural communicating, listening skills are a major dimension.

A more specific approach could be further focused by examining how the operation of certain nonverbal cues in intercultural interviews are perceived by the listener. Richmond (1991, 292) stresses the importance of nonverbal cues in intercultural communication by stating that perhaps the nonverbal aspects are more critical than the verbal aspects because we readily recognize that other people speak a language different from our own. What we fail to recognize is that other people's nonverbal messages are even more vastly different from our own than their languages.

Purpose of Paper

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the operation and outcomes of a student intercultural interview project. Specifically, the goal is to report upon an investigation into the extent to which American university student interviewers perceive differences in certain nonverbal cues (conversational space and hand gestures) in interviews with persons from another culture and how the American students perceive such observations affect their ability to listen to the

interviewee.

Background - Nonverbal Cues and Listening

Thomlison (1991) comments on the importance of listening and the involvement of nonverbal cues in intercultural communication. He notes that just as communication and culture are inseparable, so are listening and culture. In professional as well as personal intercultural interactions, there are several major elements of culture that listeners must understand to maximize their communication effectiveness. One of the four elements stressed is the nonverbal system. Oludaja (1992, March) concurs with the significance of nonverbal cues in intercultural communication when he observes that nonverbal signals are misinterpreted more frequently than verbal statements during cross cultural encounters. When attention is given to verbal messages, people often do not listen to the subtle nonverbal messages that accompany the verbal messages.

Although some aspects of nonverbal code systems are universal, it is also clear that cultures choose to express emotions and territoriality in different ways. Cultures vary in the specific repertoire of behaviors that are evoked. Movements, body positions, postures, gestures, spatial requirements are specific to a particular culture. All cultures have display rules that govern when and under what circumstances various nonverbal expressions are required, preferred, permitted or prohibited. Cultures vary in the interpretation or meanings that are attributed to the particular nonverbal behavior (Lustig & Koester, 1993, 187-188). As noted, one nonverbal cue is conversational space.

Conversational Space

Personal space distances are culturally specific. The habitual use of the culturally proper spacing difference is accompanied by a predictable level and kind of sensory information. For someone who is accustomed to a large spacing distance, at 3 feet the voices sound too loud, it might be possible to smell the person's breath, the other person will seem too close and perhaps out of the "normal" focal range, and the habitual way of holding the body may no longer work. Then the culturally learned cues, which are so helpful within one's culture, can become a hindrance (Lustig & Koester, 196-197). Another nonverbal cue is the use of gestures.

Gestures

Although body movements provide a wealth of information, interpreting that information is not that simple... It's hard to interpret body movements without paying careful attention to the specific situation, including your relationship to the other person and the cultural context in which you are interacting. The same gestures may mean different things in different cultures... Not only the gestures but the size, intensity, and frequency of our actions can take on communicative importance (Berko, Rosenfeld, & Samovar, 1994, 130).

It seems apparent that the interaction of nonverbal cues and listening can play a significant role in the effectiveness of intercultural communication. For some understanding of the context in which the participants participated, at this point in the paper a brief description will be given of the nature of the course and the student project employed as the means to ascertain the extent to which students perceive any impact of nonverbal cues on intercultural listening.

The Course and the Project

The American student interviewers were drawn from a multi-sectioned senior level course in intercultural communication which enrolls 30 students per section. The course is structured to concentrate upon the cultures of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East as well as the primary non-Caucasian cultures in America - the African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans.

As a major project in the course the student may choose to interview someone who has been in the United States preferably a year or less. Two or more interview sessions are undertaken from which two types of information are sought. One type is information about the culture and communication process furnished in observations by the interviewee. A second type is information gained from the two participants reflecting on the communication between the two of them in the interviews. For purposes of primary responsibility, the American student is designated as "the interviewer" and the person from the other culture "the interviewee". It is stressed, however, that both participants are encouraged to both ask questions and initiate comments in the interviews (Ostermeier, 1993, April, & Ostermeier, 1994, March). As a key part of the process, the American student completes the "Nonverbal Communication Questionnaire" to focus observation and analysis on the two nonverbal cues and listening (see Appendix A).

Research Questions

Does the American university student interviewer perceive differences in the use of conversational space and hand gestures of the interviewee from the other culture?

If differences are perceived, specifically what was different? For conversational space, did the interviewees position themselves closer or more distant? Were they more stationary or did they move about? For hand gestures, were they used more or less? expansive or smaller?

Do differences in the conversational space and hand gestures impact on their own listening behavior as perceived by the interviewers? Do perceived differences make it easier or more difficult to listen? What, specifically, made it easier or more difficult?

The Participants

A total of 103 persons from cultures outside the United States were interviewed by American students enrolled at a medium size midwestern state university. Cultural areas of the world represented by the interviewees were: Asian - 45 students from 10 countries, African - 13 from 5 countries, European - 23 from 12 countries, Latin America - 14 from 8 countries, and Middle Eastern - 8 students from 4 countries. The international persons were either university students or AFS high school students. An equal number of American students served as the interviewers.

Results

Conversational Space

American interviewers perceived differences in the use of space by the international interviewees to the following degree by cultural area of the world. Perceiving differences for Europeans were 43% of the interviewers, Asians 48%, Africans 62%, Latin Americans 64%, and for Middle Easterners by 75% of the interviewers. Individuals from all five cultural areas were perceived as positioning themselves closer in

space than would an American. Viewing Asians as being closer were 67% of the American interviewers, Africans 67%, Europeans 80%, and Latin Americans and Middle Easterners by 100% of the interviewers.

In addition to the spatial factor of degree of closeness, interviewers also indicated whether the interviewees were more stationary or moved around more than Americans. Individuals from all five cultural areas were considered to be more stationary - Middle Easterners by 68%, Europeans and Latin Americans by 70%, Africans by 83%, and Asians by 93% of the American interviewers. These results indicate interviewers did perceive differences in various degrees in the use of conversational space by the international interviewees depending on the cultural area of the world represented. Since differences were reported by the interviewers, the next aspect examined was to see if the observed differences had any perceived impact on listening.

Of the 103 American student interviewers, approximately 62% volunteered a comment as to the role of conversational space in listening. Nearly half (49%) stated the international person's use of space made it more difficult to listen. Almost as high a number (42%) felt it had no noticeable impact while a small number (9%) said the use of space made it easier to listen.

Of those who believed it helped them to listen, 50% gave as the explanation that meanings were communicated more effectively. Another 30% felt the nature of the conversational space expressed a feeling of closeness for the participants. The smallest number (20%) stated how space was used made them feel more relaxed. Two additional outcomes should be noted for those interviewers who reacted positively to the

use of space. While the American interviewers claimed the closer conversational space made it easier to listen to Africans, they found the closer space made it more difficult to listen to Latin Americans. Also, none of the interviewers of Asians reported the different use of space made it easier to listen.

Of those who found the way space was used caused greater difficulty in listening, 58% stated it made them feel more uncomfortable. Most often this was due to the interviewee positioning himself/herself too close. Another 19% noted it affected their concentration to the point of being distracting. The claim that closeness in space intimidated them was made by 16% while 7% felt it expressed disinterest in them. It should be noted that all of the comments volunteered about "uncomfortableness" except two were directed at Asian interviewees. All of the comments about Middle Easterners involved the American interviewer feeling "distracted" or "intimidated".

Hand Gestures

The percentage of American interviewers saying there were differences in the use of hand gestures by the interviewees were: Europeans by 52%, Africans by 69%, Middle Easterners by 75%, Latin Americans by 79%, and Asians by 84%. Observed as gesturing less than Americans were Asians by 65%. Gesturing more were Middle Easterners by 67% and Latin Americans by 82% of the American interviewers. Concerning types of gestures used, the percentage of interviewers detecting differences were Europeans by 52%, Africans by 62%, Middle Easterners by 75%, Latin Americans by 79%, and Asians by 80%. Fewer different types were reported for Asians by 71% of the interviewers. No tendency either way was found for Europeans or Africans while Latin Americans and Middle

Easterners were reported to use more different types of hand gestures.

The percentage of interviewers observing differences in the size of hand gestures were: Europeans by 44%, Africans by 54%, Middle Easterners by 67%, Latin Americans by 71%, and Asians by 75%. Using more expansive gestures were Middle Easterners by 67% and Latin Americans by 70%. Smaller gestures were reported to be displayed by Asians by 85% of the interviewers. No tendency was shown either way for Africans and Europeans. With differences in hand gestures perceived in varying degrees by the interviewers, what follows is an examination of any affects on listening thought to be influenced by these differences.

A total of 59% of the American interviewers volunteered an observation about the affect on listening of the use of hand gestures by the international interviewees. The largest number (44%) indicated the gestures had no impact on listening, 31% stated the gestures made it easier to listen and 25% found it increased the difficulty of listening.

Of those saying it helped them to listen, by far the largest number (63%), perceived that the use of gestures gave more complete meaning to what was being communicated. All of the comments made about Asians and all but one of the comments about Europeans focused on the explanation of "giving more complete meaning" to the message. A total of 26% observed that the gestures helped keep their attention and interest in what was being said. All of the comments describing "attention and interest" were expressed about the Asian interviewees. The smallest number (11%) said it forced them to concentrate more on what was being

communicated. Over-all, the interviewers expressed the opinion that when Asians did use hand gestures, while they were less frequent and smaller in size, the gestures made it easier to listen to the interviewees.

For those who felt the way the gestures were used caused more difficulty in listening, the largest number (44%) were distracted by the extensive use of gestures while 38% were distracted by the fact that no gestures were used. All of the statements about being distracted by too many gestures were directed at Middle Easterners. With one exception, being distracted by no gestures was claimed as descriptive of interacting with Asians. Of the remaining smaller number of observations, 12% stated the gestures caused confusion in the meanings for the verbal message while 6% said the interviewee expressed a state of being uncomfortable by their use of gestures which in turn made the interviewer uncomfortable. Over-all, the extensive amount of gesturing, the different types, and the expansiveness of gestures made it more difficult to listen to Middle Easterners.

Summary and Conclusions

Concerning the nonverbal cues of conversational space and hand gestures, American university student interviewers were more likely to report that they observed differences in the use of these cues by international interviewees when the use of these cues was compared with behavior of Americans. For conversational space, interviewees were perceived as positioning themselves closer and being more stationary. For hand gestures, differences were observed in frequency, type, and size.

Type of nonverbal cue was an important factor as differences in the use of space by international interviewees appeared to make it more difficult to listen while differences in hand gestures seemed to either make no difference or tended to make it easier to listen. In some instances, the adverse affect on listening by the interpretation of the nonverbal cue was perceived to be a "negative message directed at the content of the conversation" (for example, "difficulties in understanding the meaning of what was being said"). At other times, it was reported to be focused on the interviewer himself/herself (for example, "feelings of being intimidated").

Whether differences in meanings for nonverbal cues appear to make it easier or more difficult to listen may depend on the cultural area of the world of the international person. American student interviewers stated nonverbal differences made it more difficult to listen to persons from the Middle East and Latin America while it made it easier to listen to Africans.

It is important to note that differences in certain nonverbal cues do not necessarily translate into greater difficulty in intercultural listening. Such differences may indeed cause the listener to be more motivated to listen more carefully, to perceive that the other person is more interested, to cause them to be more relaxed, or to see greater clarity in the meaning of the verbal message. On the other hand, it is just as important to remember negative outcomes may occur due to perceived nonverbal differences such as causing the listener to feel intimidated, to be uncomfortable because of the cues being distracting, to feel the other person is not interested, or to cause confusion in meanings for the verbal message. The intercultural listener must be

aware and prepared that either might occur.

An intercultural interview project such as the one reported upon in this paper gives students an opportunity to "actively experience" selective concepts relevant to gaining effectiveness in intercultural communication. In this case, focus was on certain nonverbal cues and their affect on listening. The outcomes of the project experience point to the potential for the misreading of nonverbal cues in interactions between persons from different cultures and the subsequent impact on intercultural listening. It would seem imperative, therefore, that both the intercultural communicator and listener (including university students) become more informed and proficient in recognizing the meanings for intercultural nonverbal behaviors in preparation for listening as well as speaking in an intercultural context.

APPENDIX A
NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Interviewing Someone From Another Culture

You should look over the following questionnaire items prior to having your interview sessions.

Country/Culture _____ Sex _____ Estimated Age-Over 21? Yes No

Number of months the person has been in the United States? _____

USE OF CONVERSATIONAL SPACE:

1. Very Similar to Americans _____ Very Different _____

2. If the use of space was different, check appropriate responses:

a. Distance between us: _____ closer _____ further away

b. Changes in space: _____ stayed same _____ moved around

c. Other (please specify) _____

d. What meanings were communicated to you by these differences?

e. In what ways do you feel these differences affected your listening to the other person?

USE OF HAND GESTURES:

1. Very Similar to Americans _____ Very Different _____

2. If hand gestures were different, check appropriate responses:

a. Frequency _____ more _____ less than Americans

b. Types or kinds _____ more _____ less

c. Size _____ larger _____ smaller

d. Other (please specify) _____

e. What meanings were communicated to you by these differences?

f. In what ways do you feel these differences affected your listening to the other persons?

(continue any comments on reverse side)

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